

# Communicating the Christian Concept of Hope with those living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper shall deal with the concept of hope and how it can be communicated to those living with HIV/ AIDS. The church in South Africa and around the world should rise up to the challenge and take the opportunity given to her to proclaim the hope that is found in Christ Jesus. In this section I shall give a brief definition of the Christian term “Hope” and how it should be communicated effectively to those living with HIV/AIDS with the fear of death upon their minds. But before I deal with the subject at hand it is important to understand the conditions that we live in with regards to the HIV/AIDS prevalence in South Africa, below are the alarming statistics and the reality the church faces and the opportunity it presents.

Fig. 1 Estimated HIV prevalence among antenatal clinic attendees, by province<sup>1</sup>

Province	2001 prevalence %	2002 prevalence %	2003 prevalence %	2004 prevalence %	2005 prevalence %	2006 prevalence %	2007 prevalence %
KZN	33.5	36.5	37.5	40.7	39.1	39.1	37.4
Mpumalanga	29.2	28.6	32.6	30.8	34.8	32.1	32.0
Free State	30.1	28.8	30.1	29.5	30.3	31.1	33.5
Gauteng	29.8	31.6	29.6	33.1	32.4	30.8	30.3
N.West	25.2	26.2	29.9	26.7	31.8	29.0	29.0
E.Cape	21.7	23.6	27.1	28.0	29.5	28.6	26.0
Limpopo	14.5	15.6	17.5	19.3	21.5	20.6	18.5
N.Cape	15.9	15.1	16.7	17.6	18.5	15.6	16.1
W.Cape	8.6	12.4	13.1	15.4	15.7	15.1	12.6
<b>National</b>	<b>24.8</b>	<b>26.5</b>	<b>27.9</b>	<b>29.5</b>	<b>30.2</b>	<b>29.1</b>	<b>28.0</b>

Fig. 2 Estimated HIV prevalence among antenatal clinic attendees, by age

Age Group	2001 prevalence %	2002 prevalence %	2003 prevalence %	2004 prevalence %	2005 prevalence %	2006 prevalence %	2007 prevalence %
<20	15.4	14.8	15.8	16.1	15.9	13.7	12.9
20-24	28.4	29.1	30.3	30.8	30.6	28.0	28.1
25-29	31.4	34.5	35.4	38.5	39.5	38.7	37.9
30-34	25.6	29.5	30.9	34.4	36.4	37.0	40.2
35-39	19.3	19.8	23.4	24.5	28.0	29.6	33.2
40+	9.8	17.2	15.8	17.5	19.8	21.3	21.5

(These statistics are based on its sample of 33,488 women attending 1,415 antenatal clinics across all nine provinces, the South African Department of Health Study estimates that 28% of pregnant women were living with HIV in 2007.)

In October 2008, Statistics South Africa published the report “Mortality and causes of death in South Africa, 2006”. This document contains how many people died from each cause according to death notification forms.

The report reveals that the annual number of registered deaths increased to massive 91% between 1997 and 2006. Among those aged 25-49 years, the rise was 170% in the same nine-year period. While part of the overall increase in deaths can be assimilated to population growth. This does not however explain the disproportionate rise in deaths among people aged 25 to 49 years. In 1997, this age group accounted for 29% of all deaths, but in 2006 it accounted for 42%.

Fig 3 Reported deaths from all causes, 1997 to 2006

Year of Death	Age (years)					Total
	0-9	10-24	25-49	50+	Unspecified	
1997	35 441	22 639	92 829	160 076	5 574	316 559
1998	41 172	25 808	114 249	178 776	5 104	365 109
1999	41 835	27 690	129 916	178 892	2 704	381 037
2000	42 843	29 583	150 562	189 566	2 214	414 768
2001	44 902	31 452	173 226	202 009	1 920	453 509
2002	50 767	34 439	201 153	211 693	1 928	500 082
2003	56 708	37 499	229 418	227 778	2 796	554 199
2004	62 898	38 405	244 129	224 115	3 073	572 620
2005	67 715	38 389	250 897	233 191	3 235	593 337
2006	68 292	39 003	251 067	245 963	1 155	605 480
<b>Increase 1997-2006</b>	<b>93%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>170%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>-79%</b>	<b>91%</b>

## 2. Hope Defined

The Christian word hope does not indicate a vague or a fearful anticipation, but always the expectation of something good. In other religions there are of course, ideas of a metaphysical future, but no hope providing comfort and freedom from the fear of death. Thus the hope is in the “future of the Christ who has come”. The Christ who died and rose again and whose presence are known through the Spirit. Thus because of Christ resurrection, we will also all rise (1 Corinthians 15:20 –26). John James (1859) describes hope as “the mainspring of human action- the lunar influence that keeps the tide of human affairs in perpetual and healthy motion. Without hope all things would settle down into an offensive and pestiferous stagnancy.”

### 3. Communication of the Christian Message

According to J. Heinrichs, Christianity can be understood as a religion of communication. (1981: 3-9). One reason that the Christian Trinitarian view of God is important is that for the first time in history a dialogical that is, communicational view of the deity was put forward; God is both before us, with us, and in us. The doctrine of the incarnation represents God's self-giving, communicative, action toward creation. According to Heinrich, the doctrine of redemption takes place through a communication process, which allows us to maintain and to increase our sense of identity, an awareness of who we are, by means of interacting with and contributing to the total society. And love, the essential Christian message, can be made manifest only by credible preaching by word and deed, on the one side, and by practical commitment (i.e. faith) on the part of the recipient. (1981:7).

Heinrich further states that, "the entire content of Christian faith is nothing other than the development of the dialogical principle itself," and "the relationship to God is not simply communication. It is rather that which makes communication possible" (1981:7). If we take Heinrich's analysis as a starting point and at the same time accept the requirement that theology must at all times take into account the meanings present in common human experience, then for Christians the aim of communication is to help people interpret their existence in the light of what God has done for them as manifest in Jesus Christ, especially the hope that we have in Him, because of His resurrection.

This means that the purpose of Christian communication is to ask, How can we communicate the gospel in such a way that others will accept the hope it offers while living with HIV/AIDS? And put the gospel before people in such a way that it is so clear to them that they can accept it, or reject it. In other words the gospel must be communicated in the "now". Of course, one can never know with certainty what are the exactly "right" and "wrong" reasons for someone else, any more than we can know perfectly the innermost thought of others. Therefore, in fashioning a strategy to communicate one's faith hope in Christ, one can only act in faith, never in certainty. But the objective should always be to present the Gospel in ways so clear and self-evident that the recipient will have an experience, so that the good news will make complete sense to his or her own inner world, giving them hope in the midst of despair.

### 4. Communication As Revelation

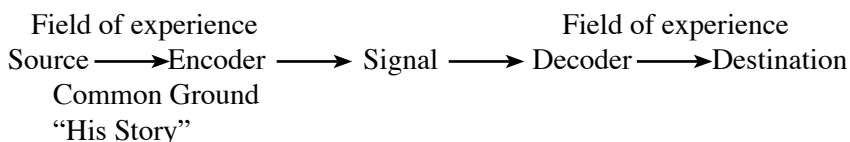
How is the Christian faith and hope authentically communicated to those living with HIV/AIDS? How does communication, or knowing about God, or the hope that can be found in Him take place? Richard Niebuhr (1952:43-90) helpfully distinguishes between two ways in which we know: our external history and our internal history

External history is that set of experiences, which are available to everyone: they are events, ideas, actions, and experiments that can be duplicated. External events are impersonal. Internal history is a personal story about "our" time, "the now". Although it, too deals with events that are verifiable by the community, the time involved is our duration. The history is our history. The experience is present in

our memory. Using the Schramm model again one can clearly see that communication only takes place when there is a common experience on the “now”.

### 5. Impact of the Field of Experience

Paramount to Schramm’s model of human communication is that, all engaged in the process of communication must be capable of understanding one another. A representation of this critical aspect of the communication process as depicted in Schramm (1965) follows:



Schramm defines the firsthand knowledge attained in the course of one’s lifetime as the field of experience. When applied to his model, the field of experience can in varying degrees facilitate communication, or work to its detriment. For instance, if the message encoded by the source is in Tamil, and the destination is not conversant with this language, decoding will not be possible and communication will be completely ineffectual. If, however, the communication is in English, but the message contains highly technical language, an English-speaking receiver will successfully comprehend the desired message only to the degree her respective field of experience affords knowledge of this specialized terminology. In summary, the source and destination can encode and decode respectively only to the extent their experience permits.

As a consequence, in order to increase the likelihood that the communication will be successful, the source attempts, whenever possible, to encode the message in a manner that capitalizes on those experiences most familiar to both parties. The area formed by the overlapping of the field of experience circles in the above diagram represents this desirable area of “common ground”. Schramm (1982:1-16) states that, “if two people are going to communicate effectively, their stored experiences...against which they interpret the signals that come to them and decide how to respond to them...have to intersect over some topic of common interest”

The source utilizes signs, or signals that represent experiences, to formulate the message. However, a sign will elicit different reactions than the actual object it represents. For example, the words “HIV/ AIDS” evokes a different response than the presence of someone infected by it. Further, Schramm (1963:3-25) cautions that language is simply an abbreviated sign system that people must be able to write and read. However, the system is not universally consistent; what one person codes as “HIV/AIDS” may differ markedly from the decoder’s perception of that same sign. Finally, the message is a separate entity in the communication process that attains its meaning only through the potential application of individual experience.

Thus the task of the Christian communicator to reveal our internal history, and the internal history of our community; in such a way that it will help individuals ask what meaning life holds for them and their community and internal memory? Thus the content of Christian communication is not a series of logical propositions, or wall charts with connected squares “explaining” God’s plan, or texts from the Bible committed to memory, or creed, or theological statements. The content of Christian communication is essentially what God has done in the lives of individuals, including those living with HIV/AIDS.

There are many points of potential contact, history, nature, group experiences, individual’s stories and the Bible. The content can be logical or charted or related to biblical passages. What is important is that the content explains the internal history of the communicator and results in the recipient gaining perspective on the nature of what is ultimate reality, that is, the way things are and the hope of the resurrection that can be found in Jesus Christ.

Christianity is not , a philosophy, a system of moral truths or speculative and ideal doctrines, but stupendous facts relation to a person. Out of which flows all its implication. Christ dies, He was buried and He rose again the centrality of the Christian message. In terms of communication, it is important to note that it is not the words or content or things in themselves which are revelatory, but the relationships of meaning which are communicated. This means that authentic Christian communication is possible when relationships of meaning are communicated. Thus the meaning of the death and the suffering of Jesus can be explained through God’s salvic activity to overcome evil. It is to communicate how Christ takes our suffering into the very Godhead. Our history of suffering is taken up into his (Jesus Christ) history of suffering. This attempt is to deal with the realities of those living with HIV/AIDS by developing solidarity with the victim of suffering through the cross. Only if we take serious the suffering of those living with HIV/AIDS and live the mystery of the cross amid that suffering, in the light of the resurrection we prevent our communication from being hopeless and meaningless.

That God put unto Jesus the sins of the world and God accepted the death of Jesus as a full payment for all sins and Jesus rose from the dead is the essence of our hope. In Adam we all die but in Christ we all live. The call is to accept this divine truth and live by it. Thus our lives begin, when we live in Christ. Our hope in Christ begins not when this flesh expires, but our new life is with Christ here and **now**.

To be revelatory, communication must take place within community. Communication cannot be validated unless it is affirmed in and through the life of persons in community. From a Christian’s point of view, it is only through the resurgence of community that the individual can reconnect with God who is manifest in the process of participation and whose essence is relatedness, wholeness and harmony i.e. through the fellowship of the church. Churches should encourage communication through new forms of community e.g. A HIV/AIDS support group to encourage those living with HIV/AIDS should be constructed, giving hope in the midst of their despair. Only when we succeed in maintaining and recreating this

community, are we able to meet the need of those living with HIV, by communicating, the living hope of the gospel. This revelation can also be communicated face-to-face communication or through support groups or through the use of mass media. Mass media are technically ideal for the task of helping prepare people to hear and to receive the gospel. Mass media can provide education about the faith and stories about people and communities acting out of their religious convictions. It can examine issues and illuminate subjects which can help individuals understand themselves better, to bring them closer to reality, and to encourage them to ask the right questions about the meaning of life and the meaning of their lives, as well as to learn what Christians say and how they act regarding their involvement with the gospel in times of death.

## 6. Conclusion

The assurance is that while one still live with HIV/AIDS, the person can still have hope, which comes through accepting Jesus Christ as Saviour which comes through leads to repentance. While the pain and suffering is still a reality in this present life, this new hope in Christ offers a new perspective towards the life lived with the promises of God not only in the present but also in the life to come.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (2 Cor 4:16 NIV). “So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable; it is raised in imperishable. It is sown in dishonour; it will be raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power”(1 Cor 15:42-43 NIV). Thus at the very centre, the Christian message is a message of hope and life in and through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## 7. Notes

1. These are statistics taken from the latest on-line publication Averting HIV and AIDS

## 8. Bibliography

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